



DEPARTMENT OF LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES

News Release

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GOVERNOR

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DLNR COMPLETES TESTING OF FISHES FROM NIIHAU

HONOLULU – The latest government tests of fish samples taken from a fish kill on Ni‘ihau in February have confirmed that no detectable amounts were found of a rodenticide used to control an infestation of rats threatening native seabirds on Lehua Island, north of Ni‘ihau.

The Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) has completed testing of fish samples obtained after a fish kill in February 2009, and freshly-caught specimens collected in April. Laboratory results returned to the DLNR this month from two independent laboratories both did not detect the rodenticide, diphacinone in any of the samples.

“We have conducted two rounds of rigorous testing in independent laboratories of samples taken at two different times, and both reported no rodenticide,” said Laura H. Thielen, DLNR chairperson.

“The Robinson family has been contacted to notify them and to pass these findings on to the Ni‘ihau residents. Although fish kills occur for a variety of reasons, we will continue to look for other leads on possible causes of the fish kill,” Thielen said.

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Chronology:

The exact date of the fish kill is unknown, but according to reports from Ni‘ihau, the dead fish began to appear on Ni‘ihau between mid to late January. On February 2, DLNR and Department of Health were notified of the fish kill. When State biologists visited on February 3, they found approximately 200 dead fish concentrated at the southeastern end of Ni‘ihau with scattered individuals on other Ni‘ihau beaches. Dead fish were collected from Ni‘ihau for analysis but many were decayed, making testing difficult. Most of the fish that washed up on Ni‘ihau belonged to two species of triggerfish, a fact that continues to puzzle scientists.

Island residents raised concerns about possible causes, but focused attention on an application in late January 2009 of rodenticide-laced food pellets on Lehua Islet (off the north coast of Ni‘ihau) that was used to control an infestation of rats threatening native seabird populations.

DLNR’s Kaua‘i aquatic biologist, and a state Department of Health (DOH) Clean Water Branch specialist traveled to Ni‘ihau to investigate. They found and collected samples of the by-then decomposing fish, primarily triggerfish, which were mostly concentrated at one location on Ni‘ihau’s southern coast.

DLNR distributed one half of the fishes it collected to DOH for testing. Although a broad screening was done for organo chloride and organo phosphate pesticides, no definitive tests were performed to establish whether or not diphacinone (the active ingredient in the rat poison pellets) was present in samples from the fish kill.

DLNR then took steps to determine if diphacinone was present in the fish that died in February. DLNR’s Aquatic Resources Division contacted two labs – the Hawai‘i Department of Agriculture, Pesticides Program (DOA) , and the California Fish and Game laboratory (Cal. F&G) to analyze preserved fish samples collected in February by DLNR.

These were split into two batches and sent to both labs in early April 2009. On April 23, 2009, DLNR received a report from Dept. of Agriculture that their analysis of 9 fish samples showed non-detectable levels of diphacinone.

On May 8, 2009, DLNR received a report from California State Department of Fish and Game laboratory that their analysis of 10 fish samples from the February collections also showed non-detectable levels of diphacinone.

To address concerns about the post-incident food safety of the reef fishes around Ni‘ihau, the Division of Aquatic Resources further conducted a second field survey on Ni‘ihau on April 18, 2009. DAR, DOH staff and Ni‘ihau residents worked together to collect different live food fishes for testing for diphacinone.

Twenty-one fish samples (including kala, nenu, moi, manini, kole, as well as triggerfishes) were submitted to the State Department of Agriculture lab for testing. On May 13, 2009, DLNR received a report from DOA that their analysis of those fish showed non-detectable levels of diphacinone. These test results were also forwarded to the Department of Health.

After receiving these reports, DLNR officials then contacted the Robinson Family of Ni‘ihau to relay the laboratory findings.